A City Teaches Homeless, and Fights a Trend

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PHOENIX - Just after lunch at Pappas Regional Elementary School, where all 598 students come from homeless families, a small boy reported to Erin Angelini, the social worker, that he had no idea where to go after school. The night before, he and his mother were evicted from the motel where they had been living.

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Jonathan Cipres choosing from the items available in the clothing donation racks at the Pappas school for homeless children in Phoenix.

"At most schools, kindergarten kids don't know the word evicted, but here they all do," Ms. Angelini said.

After asking if the boy's mother had told him she would pick him up at school, and hearing that, no, she had been sleeping when he left, Ms. Angelini rushed to the motel to look for the woman. But the manager confirmed that she had left, unable to pay her bill. On a hunch, Ms. Angelini called the city's Family Services Center, where the woman was waiting in the lobby, and worked out an emergency plan that would allow her and her son to stay at the motel for one more week.

It was a stopgap. But then, the school itself is a stopgap for children whose families live in shelters, in parks, doubled up in cramped quarters with relatives, or in a strip of dingy motels long since abandoned by tourists.

By all rights, schools like Pappas Elementary should be near extinction. After all, a 2002 federal law prohibited separate schools for homeless children. The law also guaranteed homeless children the right to stay in their original schools, and required every district to name a liaison for homeless students.

Many districts have made tremendous strides in serving homeless children in mainstream schools, with social workers who help arrange transportation, clothing and food. And many districts discovered that when they trained school personnel to identify homeless students, they began to notice, and serve, many more such children in their classrooms.

But thanks to strong local backing in Congress, the Pappas schools - there are three campuses in Phoenix, serving more than 1,100 students - were exempted from the law, along with schools for homeless children in three California counties.

"The clear national trend is toward inclusion, as the federal law requires," said Barbara Duffield, policy director of the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth. "As a basic civil rights issue, children shouldn't be segregated because of their housing status. They need the stability of their home schools, which should provide the services they need."

But just as historically black colleges and women's colleges continue to draw students even after decades of integration and affirmative action, the Pappas schools are going strong. For some students, there is comfort in being at an institution shaped around their experiences and needs.

"We had the children going to another school, but we like this one better, because they get more attention," said Jose Cabrero, who sends four grandchildren he is raising to Pappas. "When the last two came, we didn't have any paperwork for them or anything, but they got right in."

The Pappas schools' very separateness makes Phoenix's homeless children highly visible, attracting a flood of community donations, enough to maintain a food pantry where students' families can get groceries, and a toy room for birthday presents, and a clothing room where every child can choose three new outfits a month.

The school has mentors and tutors who work with children individually. It has showers and a clinic, and every child gets breakfast and lunch. But there are more subtle nods to the children's situations, too.

For children in homeless families, who move frequently, transportation is often the biggest hurdle to school attendance. But the Pappas buses shift routes as children move, and outreach workers track where the families are living. Most of the students get off the bus in the morning carrying nothing - no backpack, no books. Teachers know that homework is hard to manage in the students' living situations.

"If a child falls asleep at a regular school, you wake him up and tell him to pay attention," said Dina Vance, the principal. "But when I taught here, I'd pick up the child and carry him to a spot where he could sleep for a few hours. This is a place where these kids feel comfortable, where they're free to pop up and say, 'I need a shower.' "

Pappas is not academically outstanding - no surprise, since most of the 25 or so new students who arrive at the school each week are two or three years below grade level.

Classes are large, and in one squirmy first grade, the teacher spent an interminable half-hour on a simple worksheet with pictures of things that started or ended with "k" - an activity that engaged no more than a handful of the children.

But last year, Pappas, previously an "underperforming" school on state report cards, met state and federal standards.

Sandra E. Dowling, who founded the school 25 years ago with eight students and is now superintendent of the Maricopa County Schools, said that in principle, it would be better for homeless children to stay in their old neighborhood schools.

"I would love to see these kids in mainstream schools getting all the support and help they need," Dr. Dowling said. "But as a practical matter, that's not what happens."

In Phoenix, she said, about 95 percent of the homeless children attend the Pappas schools. And that, Ms. Duffield said, is part of the problem. Separate schools, she said, make it much easier for shelters and social workers to refer students there than to fight for the transportation and support they need to stay in a mainstream school.

"When I first started in the field, 20-some years ago, the fact that children were homeless seemed like a temporary crisis, a problem that could be eradicated," said Steve Banks, attorney in chief at New York's Legal Aid Society. "What's so shameful now, whatever the programs to help them, is the national acceptance that there are homeless children."

In the end, advocates say, no school can solve the most fundamental problem facing homeless children.

"Study after study shows that lack of housing affects kids' ability to do well in school," Mr. Banks said. "Ultimately, this is a housing problem, not an educational one."